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(Continued.)

"Yes; just so. But watch (thoughts) travel powerful fast. Don't take 'em on to lap over a thousand mile."

"But it's because she is a young girl, fresh and unartificial as the mountain breeze, that I want to be with her for a little while—yes, get to know her, if I may."

Willock turned to the taciturn old man standing a little behind him. Bill Atkins, what do you say?"

"I say he's him, and do it quick!" was the instant rejoinder, accompanied by a twinkling of the eyes and a slight smile.

Willock was convinced. "Son, I you see here till we have had our breakfast and has held a caucus over you I'll bring you the verdict in about an hour. If you don't like that they're willing to do but put out for your much."

"I go on duty at 7," replied the young man composedly, "but I have a friend riding the line that'll stay with me. So I'll wait for your answer."

"That friend—one of them devils I shot at the other day?"

Willock smiled and said: "Yes."

Reverend beneath the immense whiskers an answering smile slipped like a breeze, striking the iron gray hair. "I kinder believe in you, son. Nobody can't guess that you've played the man in this matter. Now, just one thing more. You must wait here before me, with Bill Atkins for an unwilling witness, that should we let you make the acquaintance of our little girl and should you get to be friends, you two, that the very first minute it comes to you that she ain't no little gal, but is in the way of being food for love—Bill Atkins, air I snatching myself plain?"

"You ain't," returned the old man solemnly. "You're too complicated for ordinary use."

"Then you tell him what I mean."

The old man glared at Willock fiercely. "If we decide to grant your request, young man, swear on your honor that the second you find yourself thinking of our little girl as a woman, to be wined and wooed, you'll put out and never stop till you're so far away you'll be clear out of her world. And not one word to her, not so much as one hint, mind you, as to the reason of your going. I'll just be goodby and farewell!"

"You see," Willock interposed, "she is nothing but a little gal, and we don't want no foolish ideas to be contrary. You takes her for what she is, nothing took from no added to. In course she'll be grown up some day, I reckon, though may the good Lord take a good long time finishing up the world he's begun so noble. When she's grown up, when she's a woman, it ain't for us to say how you come and how you go, take from or add to. But while she's a kid it is different, according."

"You have my word of honor to all these conditions," Willock cried lightly. "As a child of the mountains I ask for her acquaintance. If I should ever feel differently about her I'll go away and stay away until she's a woman."

The two men went into the cabin. An hour later they reappeared, accompanied by the girl. Willock was still seated obediently on the rock.

"Come over here in the shade," Willock called as he strode toward a grassy bank that sloped up to a line of three cedar trees of interlocking branches. "Come over here and know her. This is our gal."

Lahoma looked at the young man with grave interest as he advanced, taking note of his garments and movements as she might have examined the skin and actions of some unknown animal. Bill Atkins also watched him, but with suspicious eye.

"Set down," said Willock, sinking on the grass. "The last man up is the biggest fool in Texas."

Lahoma and Willock instantly dropped as if shot at the same thing, breaking into laughter that caused Willock to bend to quiver sympathetically. Bill Atkins, sour and unresponsive, stood as stiffly erect as possible, aided no little in this obstinate attitude by the natural unelasticity of age.

The young man exclaimed boyishly, still smiling at the girl. "We're friends already because we've laughed together."

"Yes," cried Lahoma, "and Bill is in it too. That's best of all."

"I ain't in it!" cried Bill Atkins so fiercely that the young man was somewhat discomposed.

"Now, Bill," exclaimed the girl reprovingly, "sit right down and make the move."

"This is Miss Lahoma Willock," growled Bill, "and this," waving at the young man disparagingly—"says he is Willock Compton. I know each other."

tablet that I'd like to know about—questions that come to me as I sit looking over the hill into the sky, things Brick doesn't know and not even Bill Atkins. So that's why I'm glad to know you," Lahoma said gravely. "But why did you want to know me?" She fastened on him her luminous brown eyes, with red lips parted, awaiting the clearing up of this mystery.

Willock preserved a solemn countenance. "I've been awfully lonesome, Lahoma, the last two years, because up to that time I'd lived in a city with friends all about town and no end of gay times, and these last two years I've been in the terrible desert. You are the first girl I've seen that reminded me of home. When I saw you and knew you were my kind, the way you held yourself and the smile in your eyes."

"Oh, is that it? But I want to ask you all about yourself," remarked Lahoma thoughtfully, "because I can see from your face and the way you talk that you're a real sample of the big world. If I tell you all about myself, will you do the same?"

Willock promised, and Lahoma entered on the history of her childhood. Willock looked and listened joyously, conscious of the unusual scene, alive to the subtle charm of her fearless eyes, her unreserved confidences, the melting harmony of her musical tones.

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CHAPTER VIII.
The Half-Opened Bud.
BILL used to live seven miles away at the mountain with the precipice. Lahoma continued after she had told about the wonderful window. "But it was too far off. When he got to know me it threatened him with this far twice a day, morning and night, so at last Brick and Bill decided to cut some cedars from the mountain and make me a cabin. They took the dugout to sleep in. There are two rooms in the cabin—one, the kitchen, where we eat, and the other, my parlor, where I sleep. Some time you shall visit me in the cabin if Brick and Bill are willing. They made it for me, so I couldn't ask anybody in unless they said so."

"We are, far enough, along," observed Bill, "to be shut up together under a roof."

"I'd like to have you visit my parlor," Lahoma said somewhat wistfully. "I'd like to show you all my books. They were Bill's when we first met him, but since then he's given me everything he's got, haven't you, old Bill?" Lahoma leaned over and patted the unyielding shoulder.

She resumed, her face glowing with sudden rapture: "There are six books—half a dozen. Maybe you've heard of some of them. Bill's read 'em over lots of times. He begins with the first on the shelf, and when he's through the row he just takes 'em up all over again. I like to read parts of them—the interesting parts. This is the way they stand on the shelf: 'The Children of the Abbey'—that's Bill's favorite; 'The Scottish Chiefs'; 'David Copperfield'; 'The Talsman'; 'The Prairie'; 'The Last of the Mohicans'."

"And so your cabin was built," Willock prompted her, "and the men took the dugout?"

"Yes, and then—oh! The most wonderful thing happened. A family settled in the arm of the mountain at the west end—a family that had a woman and a baby in it. For three years I and the mother and her baby to show me how to be a woman. Then came the soldiers. Brick thinks a big cattle king stood in with congress, and he got the soldiers sent here to drive out all the settlers because they were beginning to farm the land instead of letting it grow wild for the cattle. Anyway all the settlers were driven out of the country, and it's been four years since I lost my only friends in the world—except Brick and Bill. What makes me and Brick and Bill mad is that the soldiers didn't have any right to drive out the settlers, because Texas claims this country, and so does the United States, but it's never been settled."

"But they didn't drive you out?"

"You see," Brick explained simply, "we didn't want to go."

"I nearly broke Mrs. Featherby's heart to have to leave," Lahoma added, "for they'd got a good stand of wheat, and I think she liked me 'most as well as I liked her. But Mr. Featherby came from Ohio, and he had respect to the government, so when the soldiers said 'go' he 'lled up stakes'."

"We ain't got no respect to nothing," Brick explained, "that stands in the way of doing what we're a mind to. The soldiers come to force us out, but they changed their minds. We will stay here at anchor till Lahoma steams out into the big world with sails spread. Nothing ain't more sheltering than knowing you have a moral right and a dependable gun."

"So that's about all," Lahoma went on. "These past four years we've just been to ourselves, with a long journey once a year to the settlements. And I've tried to do like Mrs. Featherby used to do and be like she was. She'd been to Europe, too, and she'd taught school in New England. She was like you—right out of the big world. She came out here because the family was awful poor. Is that why you left the big world?"

"So that's about all," Lahoma went on. "These past four years we've just been to ourselves, with a long journey once a year to the settlements. And I've tried to do like Mrs. Featherby used to do and be like she was. She'd been to Europe, too, and she'd taught school in New England. She was like you—right out of the big world. She came out here because the family was awful poor. Is that why you left the big world?"

Willock shook his head. "I'm poor enough," he said, "but it wasn't that. It was a girl."

"That we have never dreamed of," resumed Lahoma meekly, "and that's what I would like to hear about. I'm just a little girl now, but when I am of age I'm going out into the big world so that's why I'm so glad to know you. To use you like a kind of dictionary. Are you coming back here again?"

"I hope so," he exclaimed fervently. "And so do I. In my cabin I have a long list of things written down in my

Brick Willock explained: "He's got a sweetheart. He's been carrying her letters for about two years. He's done spoke for, Lahoma, staked out, as a fellow might say, and squatted on."

Lahoma looked at him in breathless interest. "A girl out in the big world? Completely civilized, I reckon! Was she as old as I am?"

"She is nineteen years old and so thoroughly civilized that she thinks this part of the world is still overrun with Indians and buffaloes. She wouldn't live out here for a fortune, and she wouldn't marry a man back east without one. That's why I'm here. I didn't have the fortune."

"Does she love you, Willock?" Her voice was so soft, her eyes were so big, that Bill uttered a smothered groan, and even Brick sat up.

"She did the last time I saw her." He spoke lightly; but, gazing into the wonderful depths of Lahoma's eyes, he felt a queer sensation like a lost heart beat.

"Did she send you here as a kind of test?"

"Oh, no; she told me good by, and we parted forever. Both of us were poor. You can't live in the city if you're poor. You can be poor there, but not live. By this time she's found some one with property, I dare say. She's tremendously handsome and accomplished and has a very distinguish-

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"Then that's what I'd do!" Lahoma cried. "I'd just face it. She isn't worthy of you if she's rather have a fortune than the man she loves. I'd just sit down and face it."

"I will!" He had never before thought it could be easy. It seemed very easy now.

"Maybe I could help you," Lahoma suggested earnestly. "If you come to the cave to visit us we will try to occupy your mind, won't we, Brick—and Bill?"

Bill looked at Willock glumly. "It's too occupied now, I'm afraid."

Lahoma opened her eyes wide, sincerely perplexed.

"Bill," cried Brick warningly, "you're going to start a fire where they ain't even been no kindling laid."

Willock rose hastily. "I should like dearly to come and come often," he exclaimed, "but I couldn't force myself where I'm not wanted."

"In that case," remarked Bill inflexibly, "you're seeing me for the last time and may look your fill!"

Willock smiled at him tolerantly and turned to Willock. "I ought to go to my work, Brick. I won't try to explain what this hour has meant to me, for I believe you understand."

He held out his hand to Lahoma, who had risen swiftly at these signs of departure. "God bless you, little girl!" he said cheerily. "A man's fortune who finds such cases along his desert trail!"

"But you can't go yet," cried Lahoma, not taking his hand. "There are a thousand things I want to do with you that I've never had a chance to do with anybody else—strolling, for instance. Come and stroll. I'll show you about the cave. Brick and Bill don't know anything about strolling as they do in pictures. Hold out your arm with a crook in it and I'll slip my hand just inside where you'll hold it soft and warm like a bird in its nest. Isn't this noble? And I hold back—excuse me—I hold back my skirts with my other hand, and this is the way we stroll, like an engraving out of the history of Louis XIV's court. Do, oh, do!" Her bright eyes glowed into his like beckoning stars.

"We stroll," he gravely announced, responding to the pressure of her fingers, but at the same time feeling somewhat guilty as Bill rolled his eyes fearfully at Brick.

When they were a few yards from the trees Lahoma whispered: "Make for the other side of Turtle hill. I want to feel grown up when I do my strolling, but I'm nothing but a little barefooted kid when Brick and Bill are looking at me!"

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